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Proposal Paper

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Audience: Penn State Football Fans

Success with Time

For years and years, fans and football spectators nationwide have recognized the greatness that is Penn State football. The program has had a winning tradition, especially under the leadership of legendary head coach, Joe Paterno. During his tenure as head coach, Penn State secured two national championships, in 1982 and 1986(“Penn State Has Won 68 National Team Championships”). Since then, the team has still had success relative to many of the programs throughout the country, but the national achievements of the Nittany Lions have dwindled. Penn State has not been considered a top football program for some time now. It’s not that the team is not talented; for many seasons, Penn State has been considered to have the best defense in the Big Ten. The Nittany Lions are being disregarded as a national threat simply because in most of the recent seasons, they have come up short against other big-name programs. The only way to be considered the best is to beat the best. There are several different reasons why the team has struggled against the giants of college football. Penn State has weaknesses in its recruiting, recent coaching, and scheduling compared to the nation’s top football programs. Unfortunately, Penn State football is now facing even more adversity, due to the firing of Joe Paterno. Before two weeks ago, a few adjustments may have been enough to put this football team back on top. Now, it’s safe to say that the Penn State football program, with the exception of the current players, must be turned inside out.

The first order of business for Penn State football to improve is to obtain the best players as possible. Recruiting plays a large part in determining how good a football team will be. The idea behind it is simple—the better the players a team has, the better that team should perform as long as proper coaching is implemented and team chemistry is fostered. Penn State’s recruiting classes in the past have not been up to par with those of other successful schools. The University of Alabama, a team that Penn State matched up against in the past two football seasons, handled Penn State rather easily and walked out of each contest with a win. It can be said that the players of Alabama in each season were superior to those Penn State had to offer, which is proven by the high ranking recruiting classes Alabama has had in most recent football seasons. According to Scout.com, Alabama has been amongst the top football recruiting schools rather consistently (“College Football Team Recruiting Rankings”). Although Alabama is not the only stiff competition Penn State has faced, the team gives a good measure of what Penn State’s recruiting classes need to resemble. If that’s the kind of team Penn State is going to put on its schedule, then the Nittany Lions need to play at the level that Alabama and other comparable teams play at. That begins with having the nation’s top football players on the roster.

Another area where Penn State needs to improve is the team’s coaching. Joe Paterno had a very successful career throughout his 46 years as head coach of Penn State, but recently it is obvious to many that the man is not quite in his prime anymore. In fact, for several games in the past few seasons, Paterno has not even been able to coach from the sideline. Although that doesn’t seem to be a very significant setback, it really does change the game of football when a team’s coach isn’t with his players on the sideline, confronting them and correcting them as each game progresses. Football is a sport that relies heavily on the mentality of the players. A lot of players need to be pumped up in order to play at their peak potential, and a lot of that inspiration comes from coaching. Although Paterno’s assistant coaches can relay messages from him to the players on the field, it’s not quite the same as being face-to-face.

Another contributing factor is that the Nittany Lions ordinarily do not face the top competition in the country. The Big Ten is considered to be a strong conference for football, but in recent years, not many of the teams within the conference have really been named among the best in the country. Just by looking at the bowl record for Big Ten schools in the 2010-2011 season, which was 3 wins and 5 losses, it’s easy to see that the conference does not do well on a national level(“Conference-by-Conference Bowl Records”). So, even though Penn State generally has success against the Big Ten teams, it does not say much about how good Penn State is compared to the leaders of divisions like the Southeastern Conference, where multiple teams could be considered national title contenders. Aside from facing the teams in their conference, the Nittany Lions play out-of-conference games against different teams, most of which prove to be easy victories. Of course, as mentioned earlier, there are specific seasons when Penn State will play a top program like Alabama, but overall the Lions tend to beat up on lesser teams from out of the conference. Sure, the big wins look good on the scoreboard, but again, it does not say anything in college football to dominate weak teams. The only way to really get noticed and ranked highly is to win games against legitimate teams that have established themselves. The Bowl Championship Series, or BCS, ranks teams based on three criteria—two separate polls in which several voters rank teams in order of who is best to worst, as well as a computer system that ranks teams taking into account different factors, strength of schedule being one of them (“BCS Selection Procedures”). Until Penn State football can get itself recognized by scheduling more difficult teams on a consistent basis and beating them, it’s likely that the Lions will have trouble clinching a top spot in the BCS rankings.

There are several ways to approach the adjustments that need to be made in order to for Penn State football to be a national contender. In fact, because of the most recent events that reflect poorly on the university, Penn State must go to even greater lengths in order to have any chance at winning a national championship in years to come. Right now, the Pennsylvania State University is not what it was weeks ago. Until recently, Penn State was the gold standard of universities; the school had great academics, the students had tremendous pride, and the football team had a tradition of achieving success with honor. The last of these no longer exists to the degree that it did. The football team’s ex-defensive coordinator, Jerry Sandusky’s, illegal actions regarding child abuse have caused the football program to fall apart, mostly because of one prominent reaction—the firing of Joe Paterno. It was done because Paterno had allegedly known about the illegalities Sandusky committed and had not done enough to counter these crimes. Either way, the Board of Trustees of Penn State cut the head off the snake--a very proud, unified snake at that--by removing Joe Paterno from his duties as head coach.

This act alone will undoubtedly affect the recruiting process at Penn State. In fact, a top offensive tackle recruited for the 2012 football season, Joey O’Connor, has already de-committed since the scandal was uncovered and Paterno was fired (Shanker). This is the last thing that Penn State needs as a football team. If the new players are already searching for a better place to use their talent, rather than the attention-infested campus at Penn State, then other teams already have an advantage on Penn State in the upcoming seasons. It’s not as if Penn State football was the only program with a tradition of winning and succeeding; it is absolutely a great place to play football, but there are other schools out there who have a similar football history. Happy Valley ignites on football weekends, but so does South Bend for Notre Dame and Pasadena for USC. The point is, top recruits have no problem de-committing from a school, especially when they know that another big school will recruit them just as fast. It is also unfortunate that Paterno was fired because he was a magnet for big recruits. Many good players want to play for good coaches, and Joe Paterno was above being good—he was legendary. Not only that, but it was assumed by most that Paterno was nearing the end of his career, which is an even heftier reason for a recruit to want to play under him. There are surely hundreds of good football players who would have loved to say they played for Joe Paterno in his last season, right before he retired. Except Paterno never retired---he was fired, which transitions to the next adjustment Penn State must make.

Because of the lack of players and new coaches, scheduling lesser teams will probably have to continue into the next few seasons. The Lions need to accept all the success they can get at times like these. Although the current players are all still here, it’s clear that the program as a whole has been weakened, and that will not change for some time. In order to keep the ground under their feet, the Lions need to not necessarily play awful teams, but to contest with teams in winnable games. Eventually, the more winning the program does, the better recruits will consider Penn State once again, and a good head coach will hopefully follow. It’s not going to fly to play teams Like the University of Alabama anymore. If the Crimson Tide beat up on the Lions even when the program was complete and unified, then just imagine what would happen if they played a game now. It’s likely Penn State would fall apart.

Although it was stated earlier that a change in coaching is something Penn State could use to achieve a better football program, this is not the way it needed to be done. If anything, the football program is in a deeper hole than it was a week or two ago. Not only has the football team lost the coach that attained his record-high wins all at Penn State, but the negative attention in the wake of the scandal has also probably affected the possibilities for the new head coach for the worse. Right now, the interim head coach of the Nittany Lions is Tom Bradley, a man that has coached under Joe Paterno for some years now, and who Paterno trusts. But Bradley is not necessarily what the football program needs to have greater success. His only real success as a coach has been under Joe Paterno. He does not have any prior experience as a head coach. Although it has been assumed for a few years now that Bradley was going to be the successor to Paterno, Bradley is not the credibly successful coach the Lions need to achieve greatness on a national scale. However, for now, in the wake of this scandal, Bradley may be the only real option Penn State has. No big-name coach is likely to want to take over Paterno’s Nittany Lions after the way the legendary coach went out.

As of now, there is nothing but negative attention focused on the football program at Penn State. The first steps that Penn State needs to take as a university are restoring the positive atmosphere that once enthralled Happy Valley, and to continue to prove to the nation that Penn State is a respectable place. If coaches only see the side of Penn State that rioted after Joe Paterno’s firing, it is unlikely that a respected coach will wish to coach here. For the time being, it is necessary for the Nittany Lions to do as much as they can under the leadership of Tom Bradley, and hopefully success is somehow on the horizon. Eventually, the infamy the university received from this horrible scandal will subside, and maybe people will remember how great Penn state once was, not only as a university, but as a community. In actuality, those aspects of Penn State have not changed at all, even after the past week’s events. But to everyone who is on the outside looking in, it seems as though Penn State was stripped of its integrity. Until Penn State is out of the media, at least for negative reasons, a new coach will probably not want to jump on board. Until then, it is up to Tom Bradley and those assisting him to do whatever they can to keep this great football tradition alive.

Overall, the future success of Penn State football relies heavily on the State College community as a whole. A lot of people out there have judged Penn State as a whole based on the actions of one individual. It’s up to alumni and current students of Penn State to prove to these naysayers that Penn State still is, and will remain a great place. As the State College community moves forward and continues avidly to support the football team, then eventually things will look up again. The players will continue to be proud of their team, Tom Bradley will gain some confidence as the newly appointed head coach, and recruits may reconsider Penn State as a place start their careers. A couple weeks ago, every adjustment necessary remained within the football program. Now, the change must come from everyone involved with Penn State, starting from the grass roots and growing from there.

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